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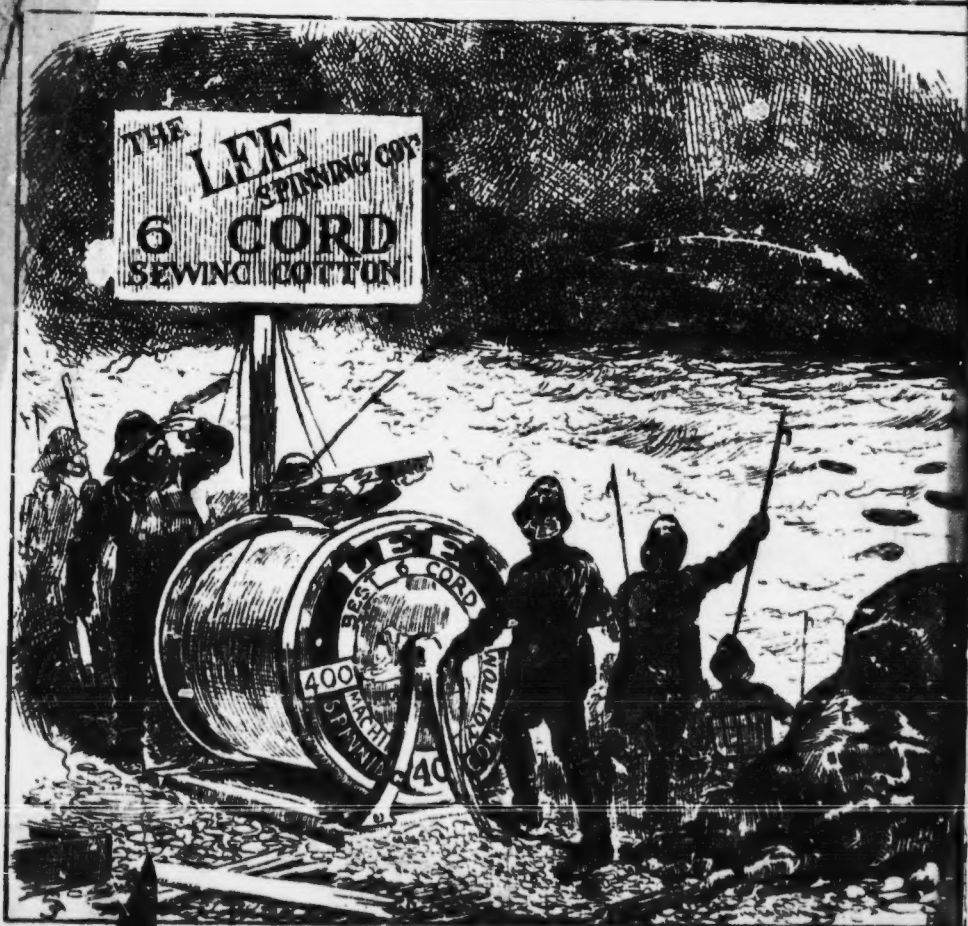
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A TERRIBLE INHERITANCE.

By GRANT ALLEN.

I.

THE garden-party at the Woolryches' was a great success. Harry Prior, the young doctor who had come to Melbury some weeks before, had never seen Bertha Woolrych looking sweeter or prettier in her innocent girlhood than she did that memorable Tuesday. Bertha was a tall and stately girl, with jet-black hair and large dark eyes, and Harry had admired her from the very first day he saw her, with an admiration ever steadily increasing. As she moved about gracefully among the groups of scattered guests on the lawn that cloudless August day, with a happy smile and a pleasant word for all alike, Harry said to himself, with a thrill in his heart, "Whatever comes, I must make her mine for ever and ever."

The Woolryches' house was one of the numerous handsome modern buildings that crowd the old Park Hill and overlook the sea at Melbury Regis; and the hall was filled with endless mementoes of Sir Arthur Woolrych's many campaigns in all climates of the earth, from Japan to the Cape, and from Canada to India. Snowshoes and toboggans in the big trophy by the front door jostled oddly

against Zulu assegais and Australian boomerangs; West African calabashes and Jamaican obeah-sticks hung side by side with American buffalo-heads and long woven strings of beads and wampum. The whole house was indeed a sort of amateur domestic museum, crammed to the attics with those numberless curiosities which Sir Arthur's taste for queer outlandish places and people had brought together from the four quarters of this strangely peopled modern world of ours.

A group of young men lounged idly chatting in the hospitable vestibule. One of them took down a quaint-looking bow and a bamboo-tipped arrow from a nail in the hall. "Odd sort of archery, this," he said with a smile to his next neighbour. "Andaman Islander's, or something of the sort. I wonder, now, whether one could hit a target at fifty yards with it?"

"I wouldn't advise you to try, Wilson," the elder of the two answered carelessly. "Sir Arthur wouldn't like your playing with his curios. He's a rusty crusty old gentleman of the old school, you know, and he thinks a lot of these rusty crusty old spears and arrowheads of his. You won't get asked to Lady Woolrych's next

At Home, I promise you, if you go playing tricks with the knobkerries and the tiger-claws."

The young man laughed and turned away carelessly. "I think I'll have a shot with them, all the same," he answered with a curl of the lip. "They've got the targets out down on the lawn there, beyond the tennis court. Let's have a try, anyhow. I should like to make a bull's-eye with an antediluvian arrow. I say, Maitland, I'm going down to take a turn at archery."

He strolled across the lawn in a lazy, easy, jaunty manner, with the bow and the splinter-tipped arrow in his hand, and came soon to the part of the grounds where the straw-backed targets stood out in a long row together against the clear skyline. Bertha Woolrych, their host's daughter, leant against the parapet of the terrace hard by, talking with her bright smile to one of the guests, and beside her Tay, her shaggy Skye terrier, lay basking in the sun, with his hair in his eyes after the fashion for ever beloved of his kind. But as soon as young Wilson raised the bow at arm's length, and began to fit the arrow to the taut string, Tay jumped up in an agony of delight (for he loved archery), and rushed forward towards the target, barking and leaping in eager anticipation of the coming sport. Bertha and her companion paused and watched, and a little group gathered around at once to observe the fate of the barbaric arrow.

In a second, almost before they knew what had happened, the arrow, missing its hold, had darted obliquely from the

stretched string, and flying aside, partly through a twist in the warped shaft, but partly also from the archer's inexperience, had missed the target altogether, and fallen beyond it, a yard or two to the left of the point aimed at. A little peal of laughter went up for the young man's discomfiture from the group of spectators; next moment, it was interrupted by a loud yelp of sudden pain from Tay, who bounded wildly into the air, and then fell back upon the lawn, quivering convulsively. Bertha saw with horror that he had lain half hidden in the unmown grass behind the archery plot, and that the bamboo tip had hit him in the side, where his wound was already bleeding profusely.

Sir Arthur Woolrych rushed to the spot at once, almost before the others could close in around the poor wounded and paralysed animal. Tay lay rigid and motionless upon the grass, only a faint trembling of his lips and feet betraying that any trace of life was still left in him. The effect was instantaneous and almost magical; he seemed to be stiffened out like a corpse at once, and to be suffering from some terrible internal agony. Sir Arthur approached and drew out the arrow from the slight wound with a stern look round upon the hushed spectators. "This is one of the Guiana arrows," he said, glancing around him angrily. "Who has done this? The poor beast is evidently worse than wounded. How foolish to play tricks with edge tools! The point must have been poisoned, as many of these savage weapons often are. I

never allow anybody in the house to handle them."

Bertha seized the stiff and trembling dog eagerly in her arms, and wrapped him up in her own light Shetland woollen wrapper. "Oh! is there any doctor here who can come and look at him?" she cried piteously. "Poor dear Tay! just look how glazed and agonized his eyes are!"

"Mr. Prior's here," somebody answered in haste from the group. "He knows more about poisons and poisoning than almost any other man in all England. He's made a special study of it, I know. Mr. Prior! Mr. Prior! Come here, you're wanted."

Harry Prior hurried across the lawn with rapid steps in answer to the call, and came up quickly to where Bertha had thrown herself on her knees upon the grass, with the poor beast growing every moment more rigid and deathlike in her trembling arms. He took the dog from her hands tenderly, and examined it with care for a few seconds. Then he said in a tone of considerable surprise, "This is a very remarkable case! How on earth did the accident happen? If it weren't impossible, I should say the animal had been poisoned with curari."

"What's curari?" Bertha asked in breathless eagerness.

"Curari?" Harry repeated. "Why, the South American Indian arrow-poison. It's very much used, you know, by the Guiana Indians. They smear it on their splintered bamboo arrowheads, and it retains its fatal power for an incredible

time. It produces tetanus, just like what this poor dog's now suffering from. But how on earth could any curari have got to Melbury? I'm the only person in the place at all likely to have any in his possession."

Sir Arthur Woolrych held up the guilty arrow before his face. "This is what did it," he said, sternly. "It's a Guiana specimen. Some young fool or other has taken it down from its peg in the hall, and gone aiming stupidly with it at the target. He pulled badly—people who meddle with these things are always just the very ones who know nothing on earth about them—and the thing slipped and went off crooked, and wounded poor Tay, who was hidden behind the target. I've no doubt it is curari. I was always afraid those tips might be poisoned."

Harry Prior gave a sigh of sudden relief. "I'm glad of that," he said. "I was half afraid at first—though I'm always very careful—that I myself might somehow be the culprit. I didn't think it likely anybody else at Melbury would have any curari, and I began to wonder whether by any extraordinary mischance or other I might have left a trace of it about undestroyed anywhere."

"But my poor dog!" Bertha cried, anxiously. "See what pain he's in! Mr. Prior, Mr. Prior, can't you do anything, please, to save him?"

"A week ago," Harry Prior answered at once, "I should have said, without a moment's hesitation, 'No, the case is hopeless.' Till then, no antidote had ever been even suggested for curari. But,

within the last few days I have had one sent me for trial from South America—a powder made from another local herb, whose properties I had reason to suspect of being antagonistic to those of the drug, and we can at least try it. If it succeeds, we shall have discovered a new cure for the most terrible form of poisoning yet known to medical science.”

“How lucky you were here!” Bertha cried delighted.

“Yes,” Harry said. “If the experiment is successful it will indeed be lucky. It will save not only your dog’s life, which to me, of course, is no small matter, but innumerable human lives as well, I trust, in the future.”

Bertha blushed as her eyes met his. Harry wrapped the dog carefully up in the shawl, and saying hastily that the treatment must be tried at once if it was to be tried at all, went off as quickly as he could to his own surgery.

II.

TO Harry Prior’s immense delight, the antidote acted with almost as marvellous rapidity as the poison itself had done. Scarcely had he injected the new solution into the wound, and washed it well with the untried powder, when the stiffened limbs began to relax once more as if by magic, and the tightened breath to come and go in the poor creature’s limbs with greater freedom. Harry laid the dog in a basket by the kitchen fire, gave it some warm milk to drink, and continued the treatment with assiduous care for a few hours.

Before nine o’clock Tay had recovered the use of his limbs as usual, and was barking loudly to return to his mistress.

At that moment Harry Prior’s heart was full to overflowing. Human nature, indeed, is strangely compounded. He had made a great medical discovery. It would relieve in future an immense mass of human suffering. It would prevent, in all probability, the commission of hideous crimes. It would perhaps prove of immense use to medicine generally. But Harry Prior thought first of none of these things just then, dear as they would have been to his heart at other times. Nor did he think either of the honour, credit, position, and wealth, which such a discovery might possibly bestow upon him. No; he thought first that it was Bertha Woolrych’s dog he had cured, and that Bertha Woolrych would be grateful for his services.

He carried the dog round carefully to the house once more, and was shown into the room where the family were sitting. Bertha was delighted at her pet’s recovery, and full of gratitude for Harry’s care and skill exerted in curing him. Harry, too, felt somewhat flushed by this time with the joy of his unexpected success. “It’s a great triumph,” he said warmly to Sir Arthur. “You know, curari has always hitherto been looked upon as incurable.”

“I know it,” Sir Arthur responded curtly, “I—I’ve always known it, ever since the famous Lichfield case. It was the stuff, you know, that Lichfield used to commit his terrible crime with—the Erith murder, as people called it.”

Harry Prior gave a sudden start of surprise. "You remember the Lichfield case, then?" he said with interest, for questions of the sort belonged especially to his own department. "You knew that Lichfield used curari?"

"Well, yes," Sir Arthur answered, with a certain show of reluctance in his voice. "I had reason to know it. The Lichfields were once intimate friends of mine. Poor Lichfield was a doctor, as you must remember, and he poisoned a patient, an uncle of his, who, he had reason to know, had lately made a will in his favour. That was twenty-five years ago, I should think. But of course you've read all about it, Mr. Prior."

"I have," Harry answered. "I recollect the case extremely well. Lichfield was himself a worker at poisons, just as I am, and I feel particularly interested in the Erith murder, because of a very curious coincidence which happened to me, myself, some months ago. I had just invented what seemed to me a plausible theory of the action of strychnine, and I sent a paper on the subject to the 'Transactions of the College of Physicians,' detailing my principle. To my immense surprise, the secretary sent me back a copy of a paper, contributed nearly thirty years ago to the same 'Transactions' by Dr. Lichfield, in which the very theory I had hit upon was distinctly foreshadowed, and almost in the very self-same words. It shows how much alike two minds may work on a single subject, that Dr. Lichfield used several of the very same illustrations and exam-

ples and analogies that I did, and that his style and manner were all but identical in every way with my own."

Sir Arthur looked at the handsome dark young doctor's large eyes inquisitively for a moment. A shade seemed to come across his bronzed brow. Then he said abruptly, "Lichfield was a very handsome dark man, with most peculiar eyes. I can see him now standing before me. Poor fellow; I was always profoundly sorry for him. Though he committed that terrible, monstrous crime, he always seemed to me, as far as I could judge, a very affectionate, kind-hearted man. I suppose the love of gain overbore everything. And yet we never thought him an avaricious man. It was curious, curious. I was always glad he never lived to get through his trial."

"He died while the trial was in progress, I think," Harry said, suggesting.

"He died while it was in progress. Died of grief and shame, I suppose, for the evil he had wrought. Couldn't face the degradation of his wife and children. He advised them to go away from England and live elsewhere under an assumed name, where the memory of his disgrace could never touch them. Then his heart broke, and he died in prison the very night before the verdict would have been given. I was glad for his poor wife's sake that he didn't live through it. If he had been hanged— But the idea is too horrible!"

"He had children, then?"

"Yes, two children: a boy and a girl; the boy a fine, handsome, dark-

haired, intelligent little fellow, with his father's eyes—the very image of Lichfield. They went away, and I never heard again what became of them. We all lived at Erith then; that was before I went into the army."

There was a pause for a moment, and then the General spoke again. "I've often wondered," he said, "what became of those poor children."

Harry shuddered. "It was a terrible inheritance indeed for them," he said. "I don't know whether my profession makes me think too much of hereditary transmission, and all that sort of thing; but if I were born with a curse like that hanging over me, I'd give up my life entirely to some kind of work that would do most good for my fellow-men, and expose me least of ail to any possible temptation. And I'd never marry. Apart even from the possibility of my passing on to my children the inherited taint inherent in their blood—which alone would terrify me—I'd never like to think that sons or daughters of mine were born with the hereditary shame of murder behind them."

"You're quite right," Sir Arthur said with prompt decision. "A drunkard's son should eschew wine; a gambler's son should never for the world touch cards or dice; and a murderer's son should feel for ever the terrible possibilities of crime within him. But then, it isn't likely that the son of a poisoner would be born with the sort of moral nature which would urge him to lead a life of earnest endeavour, and rather to conquer his own inclinations than to pass

on a taint of blood to his children's children. He'd probably never think at all about it."

Harry smiled. "That's true," he answered. "One can't help reading one's own moral ideas into the minds of others, who would in all probability be very differently constituted indeed. Thank heaven that we come of a better stock, and that temptations are for us, I hope, less present and less urgent, much as we all need always to guard against them."

At that moment, Bertha, who had passed out of the open folding windows on to the lawn some moments before, crossed on the front of the lawn in the August moonlight, with Tay beside her frisky as ever. Sir Arthur rose, lighted a cigar, and strolled out with his guest on to the lawn. Lady Woolrych rose too, and in five minutes Harry found himself, to his immense delight, standing beside the terrace parapet alone with Bertha, while her father and mother walked up and down some distance behind them. The moonbeams danced merrily on the sea below; the night was calm, and warm, and delicious. Harry Prior was very much in love. Bertha Woolrych was very beautiful. Before Harry left the terrace that evening he had whispered a few words, which need not be repeated, in Bertha's ear; and Bertha, blushing and looking down, had answered him simply, "I do, Mr. Prior." And then Harry turned and went, with his heart beating and his face flushed, the happiest and proudest man that moment in all England.

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mering apologies, told her story that night to her mother in her own room, Lady Woolrych bent over and kissed her tenderly, saying with a sigh, "My darling, we shall all be sorry to lose you, but I think you've chosen wisely; I'm sure you've chosen wisely. He's a good young man and a fine fellow. We could wish for no one better to marry you, Bertha."

But when Lady Woolrych, wiping her eyes, went in five minutes later, to tell her husband, with many praises of Harry's manliness and sterling good qualities, Sir Arthur answered somewhat uneasily, "He's a very nice young man certainly, and seems to be full of high principles and fine enthusiasm, and all that sort of thing; and they tell me he's sure to get on in his profession also. Sir Benjamin Wroxall says he's the ablest student he ever had, and he'll one day be President of the College of Physicians. But there's something in his face I don't quite like—something in his face that somehow frightens me."

"Frightens you, my dear!" Lady Woolrych interposed. "Why, I think he's got the kindest and handsomest face I ever saw, except yours, Arthur."

Sir Arthur hesitated. "Oh yes, handsome enough," he said, "and kind, I grant you; but there's something in him that reminds me strangely of somebody—well, there, never mind about it now, if you please, Amelia. The other face was kind and handsome too, I remember."

For a moment there was silence. Then Sir Arthur, fingering his eyeglass

nervously, said with a little start, "I wish he didn't take such an interest in poisons. I don't like these men who go in for poisoning; it isn't at all a pleasant subject."

"But my dear," Lady Woolrych objected gently, "somebody *must* know all about poisons, of course, or what should we do to get cured when we took them by accident? Look at the good he was able to do to poor little Tay this very day, now. Bertha would have cried her dear eyes out if she'd really lost him."

"I know, I know," Sir Arthur answered testily. "But I don't like poisons. I'm prejudiced against poisons. I have my reasons. I like the young man, and I see that he's really very fond of Bertha; but I wish he didn't go in for poisons. It's a horrid subject, a ghastly subject, and I can't and won't pretend I like it."

III.

SIR Arthur's prejudices were not invincible, and Harry Prior's gentleness and goodness of heart soon overcame them. Melbury Regis had never before had so popular a doctor. Everybody liked him, the poor especially; for Harry was always ready to take as much pains and trouble with his poorest patient as with the great folk at the Hall: Sir Arthur's family. Lady Woolrych, too, was very fond of him, and ready to welcome him as Bertha's husband. As for Bertha herself, her admiration for Harry was quite unbounded; she thought him the cleverest, wisest, kindest, and dearest man that ever existed; and, making due

allowance for the natural error of perspective common to the condition of falling in love, she was not, perhaps, so very much mistaken in her innocent reckoning.

The wedding, it was arranged, was to come off shortly. Harry had private means besides his practice, and there was no need, therefore, for a long engagement. But, before the wedding, it was Harry's desire that his mother and sister should come to live at Melbury. He had not seen them for some three or four years; for Mrs. Prior had lived the greater part of her life in Canada, and Harry had been unable to visit them since leaving Oxford and taking seriously to his profession as a doctor. For some incomprehensible reason, however, Mrs. Prior seemed very unwilling to change her residence. Harry wrote to her eagerly by post after post, begging her not to disappoint him in this matter; but his mother, who was always of a timid shrinking nature, seemed anxious not to face the stormy Atlantic in her old age, or to expose herself needlessly to a change of climate.

"You see, Bertha," he said, "my dear mother has lived in Canada now for more than twenty years, and I suppose she doesn't like to tear herself up by the roots, as it were, and come home again to settle in England; but as I can't possibly go out there, and as I long to have her living near us, I have begged and implored her, for my own sake and my sister's, to come to Melbury."

"She's a dear gentle-looking old lady," Bertha said, glancing at the photograph

that Harry handed her. "I'm sure I should love her, Harry, and I'm sure I should like her to be living near us. You're very like her too, though you're dark and she's fair: you have her mouth and her forehead exactly."

"Yes," Harry answered; "but my eyes and my profile, they say, are my father's. I can't remember him; he died when I was only a very little fellow, before my mother went to live in Canada. But my mother retains the most profound affection for him, though she can hardly ever be induced to speak of him to this day."

"But why did your mother go out to Canada?" Bertha asked.

"I hardly know. She said she could never bear her loneliness in England after my father's death. She went away, and buried herself in a little village in Canada, where she lived very quietly, though she's well off, and brought me up at a small school in the neighbourhood. Indeed, she seems to have a sort of horror of England. When I was getting to be a big boy, I felt such a desire to come home to school, and fit myself for a profession in a way that I couldn't have been fitted in Canada, that I begged her to bring me home to England, and let me go to Rugby or some other good place. But she wouldn't hear of it. After much solicitation she let me come by myself, but nothing on earth would induce her then to accompany me."

"How very odd," Bertha said. "Perhaps, Harry, she had some painful associations you don't know of in England."

"I think not; except, indeed, my father's death. That seems to have left a profound and lasting impression upon her; she's always of a most clinging, affectionate nature. But though she's one of the most reasonable and sweet-dispositioned women I know, she's sometimes moved by strong feelings which seem to me almost unaccountable. Why, I wanted to go to Cambridge, for example, because the medical schools there are said to be better than at Oxford; but my mother so begged and prayed me to change my plan that I gave way, sorely against my better judgment. She seemed somehow to have an almost superstitious terror of Cambridge."

"Perhaps your father was an Oxford man," Bertha suggested, "and she wanted you therefore to follow in his footsteps."

"Why, that's just the very oddest part of it," Harry responded briskly. "My father was a Cambridge man, and as far as I can make out (though it always saddens her for me to ask her about it), a doctor too, into the bargain. Yet when I wrote to her that I was going to take up medicine myself, she wrote me back a letter that was little less than imploring, and begged me to choose any other profession rather than that one. I went out to Canada the next vacation on purpose, and had great difficulty in talking her over. But I couldn't forego that. I felt it was my natural calling in life, and the work at which I could do most good in the world for other people. It's a splendid profession, a noble profession, to alleviate pain and lessen the

sum of human suffering; and I was so certain that I had a distinct call towards it that I went out with no other object except to alter my mother's determination. And I did alter it. When she saw my enthusiasm, and the spirit in which I regarded my work, she said herself she felt it was a serious matter, and it would be no longer right for her to oppose me. She saw I regarded medicine as a mission, and she gave way, as she always does when she feels it's a matter of conscience, not one of mere personal predilection."

"And you've persuaded her at last to come to Melbury?" Bertha said.

"Yes, I've persuaded her at last, I'm happy to say, and she sails in the *Vancouver* from Quebec next Thursday. We may expect her here in about a fortnight."

"Dear old lady," Bertha said, looking hard at the photograph. "I'm sure I shall love her if she takes after you, Harry."

"She takes *before* me wonderfully, if that's what you mean," Harry answered with a laugh. "We're as like as two peas, not only in face, but in mind and character. I fancy most parents take *before* their children, and their children in turn take after them exactly. Like father, like son. We may modify our own characters greatly for good or for evil, no doubt; but in the beginning, we owe them chiefly to our fathers and mothers. What dreadfully philosophical conversation, though, for you and me, Bertha, and only ten minutes more to see one another in!"

I omit the remainder of that evening's interview, as not necessarily intended for publication, but given merely as a guarantee of good faith.

IV.

IN the fortnight that elapsed before his mother's arrival, Harry Prior was extremely busy. A young man during his engagement is usually busy; but Harry Prior was more than ordinarily so. He had his patients to see, he had Bertha to visit, and he had a full account of his great discovery of an antidote to curari to draw up and present to the Royal Society. His researches into the nature of that terrible drug accidentally led him in the meantime to examine Dr. Lichfield's papers preserved in the library of the College of Physicians. For this purpose he had twice run up for the afternoon to London—Melbury, as everybody knows, is only an hour by express from Victoria—and in those mysterious archives he had consulted the original manuscript documents of the Erith case in the famous poisoner's own handwriting. Dr. Lichfield, all the world will remember, had been specially interested in the effects of curari, and had made several observations upon the nature of the drug, in the hope of discovering a practicable mode of treatment. It was his intimate knowledge of its working, the world said, which led him to prepare that fatal ointment that he applied with his own hands to the open wound on his uncle's body. Colonel Lichfield, the uncle, had fallen from his horse while hunting,

and given himself a serious cut on the forehead. His nephew, as everybody believed, aware of the will lately drawn in his favour, had put curari in the ointment for dressing it, and then endeavoured to ascribe the fatal effect to ordinary tetanus supervening on the accident. The reading of Dr. Lichfield's papers convinced Harry not only that the doctor knew a great deal about curari, but also that he was the only man in England at the time likely to have any of that rare drug in his possession. The only other person to whom suspicion could possibly have attached was a neighbour at Erith, a young Mr. Flamstead, who had frequent access to Dr. Lichfield's surgery. Such was the terrible story which Harry spelt out for himself, piecemeal, those two afternoons in the library of the Royal College of Physicians.

At the end of the fortnight Mrs. Prior arrived, and Harry, warned of her approach by telegram from Liverpool, went up to Euston to meet her on her arrival. The moment he saw her, he was struck with surprise at the striking change which seemed recently to have come over his mother's manner. Mrs. Prior appeared to be half frightened of everybody she saw, and to shrink within herself whenever anybody happened to draw near and gaze at her closely. She had always been timid, but her timidity now was simply painful. Still, he set it down to the novelty of the situation—her want of familiarity with crowded London railway-stations, and took her with his sister to a cab as quickly as

possible, so as to compose and quiet her evident nervousness.

When once Mrs. Prior was settled down at Melbury, however, in Harry's pretty little rose-covered cottage, she soon began to recover a little from this strange shrinking from the eyes of strangers. Harry's intention was to give up his present house on his marriage to his mother and sister, and take a new and larger one for himself and Bertha at the end of the village, by the groynes and breakwater. The cottage would just suit Mrs. Prior, and she was pleased at all the little preparations Harry had made beforehand for her comfort. It was so strange to be back in England again, she said more than once; twenty-five years ago since she left! Everybody would be greatly altered in twenty-five years! And besides, there were so few left alive now that she had known of old. Harry and his sister noticed with surprise that this remark, made again and again, seemed somehow to afford their mother consolation rather than sorrow: she seemed glad to think there were not many remaining who had been familiar with her in her early womanhood.

In unpacking her boxes, Harry came across two objects that rather interested him as family relics. One was an old-fashioned portrait of a gentleman—a handsome dark man, with noteworthy eyes—painted on ivory, and set as a miniature in a gold locket. The locket bore outside the initials W. L. He looked at it twice. Who could that be, then? W. L.! Not his father, anyhow.

His father's initials were W. P., Walter Prior. His mother always spoke of him as Walter. A grandfather, perhaps, or other relation! The second object was a small Church Service. On the blank page ran a short inscription, "For dearest Emily, with love from Walter." It was his father's writing, then—the first time he had ever seen it. Yet somehow, the hand seemed strangely familiar to him: he had surely met with it somewhere before, when or where he could not remember. He scanned it long, but failed to recollect, yet he carried it away in his mind's eye afterward.

How odd that he had heard so little about his father! How odd that he should not have known even the look of his new handwriting! How odd that his mother should always be so reticent! Well, well; now that she had come to live in England, perhaps old memories would be revived within her, and she would become a little more communicative in future. He hoped so most fervently; for a man who believed in hereditary transmission of qualities as he did would naturally like to learn as much as possible about the life and character of his own father.

Next day, Lady Woolrych and Bertha came to call upon Mrs. Prior, and both were charmed with her sweet manner and gentle old-fashioned motherly ways. Mrs. Prior, too, was delighted with Bertha, and Harry was indeed pleased and satisfied with their mutual liking. Sir Arthur, as it happened, did not come: he was up in town that day on

business at the War Office; but Lady Woolrych begged them to waive ceremony, and take tea at The Lawn next afternoon.

At five o'clock, therefore, they walked up to The Lawn, Mrs. Prior a trifle tremulous as before, but much reassured by Harry's arm and his ever-watchful and tender sympathy. Bertha and her mother met them at the door, and brought them in at once to the big drawing-room. "Oh, Harry," Bertha cried, as soon as they sat down, "have you heard the news? Papa's just brought it down from town. He met Sir Benjamin accidentally to-day in the Strand, and Sir Benjamin told him the College of Physicians had that very moment risen from voting you their gold medal for your great discovery!"

Harry smiled and flushed with pleasure, and his sister Edith, looking at him with sisterly pride, asked at once, "What discovery, Miss Woolrych? We haven't heard of it! This is something Harry hasn't yet told us of."

"Not 'Miss Woolrych,'" Bertha said, "if you please, dear. We're to be sisters so soon. Do call me 'Bertha.' But don't you know what it all is? Harry's wonderful discovery of the new antidote—the thing he cured my poor Tay with."

"Antidote!" Mrs. Prior cried with that same half-terrified look Harry had noticed on her face so often before; "antidote to what? Oh, Bertha, Bertha, for heaven's sake, don't talk about antidotes."

"But, mother," Harry interposed, lay-

ing his hand gently on her arm, "this is a splendid thing, a perfect talisman—a marvellous cure for a poison that has always hitherto been considered helpless and hopeless—calculated to do an immensity of good: it counteracts all the evil effect of curari."

At the word Mrs. Prior grew deadly pale and gasped inarticulately. "Curari," she repeated in a dreamy terror after a moment to herself. "Curari! Curari! Oh, Harry, don't speak of it! Don't mention it! Don't even think of it! I didn't know you knew anything about those dreadful poisons."

"Didn't know he knew anything about poisons!" Bertha cried in surprise, "Why, dear Mrs. Prior, he knows more about them, everybody says, than anybody else in all England. It's his great speciality, his peculiar department; and the College of Physicians has just to-day awarded him the gold medal for knowing everything on earth about them."

"Hush," Edith Prior whispered softly in her ear. "Please don't talk any more upon the subject. Dear mother can never bear to hear about poisons. It's one of her strange little nervous weaknesses—she has so many of them. Her nerves were very much shattered in her youth, and it comes out in all sorts of extraordinary ideas that Harry and I understand and make allowances for."

At that moment tea came in, and Lady Woolrych poured out a cup at once for Mrs. Prior. The old lady hardly tasted it, though she tried her best to recover her composure; but it

was clear she was upset and ill at ease ; the affair of the medal had evidently for the moment deprived her altogether of her customary spirits.

Next minute the drawing-room door opened once more, and Sir Arthur Woolrych entered by himself to greet his daughter's future relations.

He advanced towards them, tall, thin, and erect, with his military bearing and his grey moustache, the very picture of the old English cavalry officer. Lady Woolrych introduced him with a wave of her hand. "Mrs. Prior, Miss Prior—my husband ! Arthur, these are Harry's mother and sister !"

"I'm sure I'm delighted, Mrs. Prior," Sir Arthur began with his courtly bow, taking her hand with friendly solicitude, "to have the opportunity—" Then he stopped short, suddenly, as if utterance failed him, and looked at her with a strange half-frightened look, not unlike her own, though haughtier and prouder. "Curious," he murmured, "very curious. It must be so ! I can't have forgotten her !"

Mrs. Prior's hand and lips trembled violently. "Is this—Sir Arthur Woolrych ?" she asked, at last, with a terrible effort.

"It is now," Sir Arthur answered, looking her keenly in the face for a moment with his piercing glance. "But when we last met, if you recollect, I was Arthur Flamstead. You *must* remember me !"

"Sir Arthur's family name was originally Flamstead, you know," Lady Woolrych put in quietly, by way of

explanation. "He assumed the name of Woolrych instead, by royal warrant, on the death of a distant cousin on his mother's side, from whom he inherited a certain amount of property. Perhaps you've seen one another before, Mrs. Prior."

But Mrs. Prior, who had risen terrified from her chair at the first recognition, answered never a word for good or evil. She stood there, white, cold, and rooted to the ground, like a living statue, muttering only in an agonized voice to herself. "Arthur Flamstead ! Arthur Flamstead ! To think that Harry should have brought me straight into the very presence of Arthur Flamstead !"

In a single flash the horrible truth bore itself in at once upon Harry's brain. Arthur Flamstead ! He knew now where he had seen that unfamiliar name before. It was the name of the person so intimate with the Lichfield family at the time of the great Erith poisoning case.

Next moment, in another vivid flash of recognition, he remembered also where he had seen the writing of which the inscription in his mother's prayer-book had dimly reminded him. He recalled it now and identified it with horrible distinctness. Both specimens of the hand rose up with startling clearness before his mind's eye. It was the very hand of Lichfield the poisoner, as seen in the manuscripts at the College of Physicians !

Yes, yes ! there was no evading the truth ! Terrible, incredible, crushing as it was, he knew in a second he was Lichfield's son ! Lichfield the poisoner, Lichfield the murderer.

Unmanned by the event, Harry sank back speechless in a chair close by. His mother sank back equally in hers. Edith Prior, unable to comprehend the meaning of the scene, but pale and perturbed, looked on and wrung her hands in helpless misery. Sir Arthur alone retained his composure. He rang the bell, and said in a low quiet tone to the servant, "Send round the brougham as fast as Wilson can get it ready. Mrs. Prior is ill. She can't remain here."

It seemed like dismissal, yet it was the kindest thing to do under such appalling circumstances. In a few minutes more the brougham came round, and without another word Harry put his mother and sister into it, and they all three drove off alone together, silent and horror-struck, to their own cottage.

On the way back nobody spoke a single word aloud. Only once, Mrs. Prior opened her lips. "Harry," she murmured, in a scarcely audible voice, "he didn't do it. He never did it. I know in my heart he could never have done it."

v.

"FATHER," Bertha cried, in a tone of entreaty, as soon as they were gone, "what does it all mean? What do you know about them? Why on earth were Harry and his mother so terrified at learning that you were once Arthur Flamstead?"

Sir Arthur walked up and down the room with nervous anxiety. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, held

his head downward towards the carpet, and looked the very picture of abject misery. "Bertha," he answered at last, after a long pause, "don't ask me! I won't tell you. I can't tell you. I shall never tell you. It's better for you that you should never know. But my child, my child, I cannot now let you marry Harry Prior."

"Papa!"

It was an agonized cry, a cry of unutterable grief and terror. Her father rushed up and caught her in his arms. Bertha looked at him with glazed eyes. For a moment he almost thought he had killed her; he lifted her up like a child, with more strength than he fancied he still possessed, and carried her up in his trembling arms to her own bedroom. There he laid her down gently on the sofa, and stood beside her, watching her long and tenderly, while her mother and the maid bathed her forehead; but not another word of explanation would he say to either of them. "No, no, Amelia," he cried eagerly, when his wife pressed him. "It's too terrible, too harrowing. It recalls the most awful memory of my life. I can't talk about it. Impossible! Impossible."

The night that followed was an awful one for all of them.

Through that long sleepless night Sir Arthur had but one thought in his torn bosom,—“Perhaps Harry Prior will come to-morrow to release her from her engagement of his own accord, and so save me the pain and horror of breaking it.”

Through that long sleepless night

Harry Prior lay tossing and turning, a prey to terrible alternate fears and suspicions, trying to school himself to this ghastly reality. He was Lichfield's son; that much was certain; the son of the man he had always thought of as "Lichfield the murderer." The son of the man whom everybody remembered as the very embodiment of cool, deliberate, cold-blooded treachery. The son of the man who had cruelly poisoned the uncle who had always been to him like a father—poisoned him with a painful and horrible drug, with whose hideous effects he was better acquainted than anybody else in all England. Harry shrank appalled from so unutterable a thought. The father whom he had long pictured to himself in imagination as so good and true and kind and noble-hearted, faded away at once into absolute nothingness; and he knew him now for just what he was—Lichfield the poisoner! Lichfield the murderer!

To any man on earth the shock would have been terrific; to Harry Prior, with his generous enthusiasm, his high aspirations, his eager desire to do good work in the world for suffering humanity—to Harry Prior, with his profound belief, right or wrong, in hereditary characteristics—it was nothing less than crushing and annihilating. He almost felt himself in some sense a murderer too. Knowing that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation, he recognised, as it were, his own potential responsibility for the sins which had been passed on inherent in his own flesh and blood and

mind and temperament. How he hated himself now for his interest in poisons—paltering and playing, as he fancied, with the means of crime! How he shrank appalled even from his own noble profession—that profession which he had hitherto always regarded with such love and pride and filial affection—seeing in it under these altered circumstances nothing but hideous opportunities and temptations for the most awful wrong. It was indeed a painful awakening; may all of us escape so unspeakable a trial!

He saw it all distinctly now: his father's death; his mother flying horror-stricken to Canada, and hiding herself under an assumed name in a remote village; her alarm at strangers; her disinclination to let him attend his father's university; her dislike of medicine as his choice in life, with all its hereditary pitfalls and tendencies; her shrinking from the very name of poison; her anxiety never more to be recognised by those who had known her in her former existence. Yes, yes, he felt himself in very truth the inheritor of a terrible and appalling crime. He dared not face it! He dared not face it!

And then at other times the thought came over him, Ought he to condemn any man unheard? Above all, ought he so to condemn and judge his own father? Was he guilty? Could he have been guilty? The case had never been fully tried out. Lichfield the murderer—Oh! ghastly thought! He could not think of him even in his own mind as his father at all, but only by that cruelly familiar

question-begging title—Lichfield the murderer had died half tried in prison, and judgment had gone against him by default at the unjust tribunal of public opinion. But was it right? Was it true? Was it conceivable? His mother's words came back to him at once, "Harry, Harry, he never did it." He remembered the declaration of Serjeant Thorowgood, Lichfield's counsel—he could not yet think of him as his father—"On my soul and honour, gentlemen of the jury, I believe the prisoner at the bar to be as innocent as a babe of the crime imputed to him." It was a strange and unusual proceeding on the part of a barrister; it had been remarked upon as irregular—a piece of Thorowgood's well-known rhetorical Irish extravagance: was it not possible that it might be really the impassioned expression of a genuine opinion, wrung from an advocate in the heat of his advocacy by the strength of his conviction of his client's innocence, coupled with his consciousness of the futility of the evidence in his favour? Harry himself, like all the rest of the world, had immediately judged the case on the written evidence against his father. Now that he knew he was Lichfield's son, was it not his plain duty, for his own sake, for his mother's sake, for Edith's sake, for the sake even of his father's memory, to clear up the mystery, if mystery there were, and to prove, if possible, Lichfield's innocence?

One thing, however, was quite certain. As things now stood it was his plain duty, too, to release Bertha from the promise that bound her. Either way,

that duty must be honourably faced. If he was really a murderer's son, he would never do aught to hand down to others the shadow of the curse that devolved upon himself. Even if he were not, he must first prove the fact satisfactorily to himself, and then to the world, before he could ask his pure, beautiful, stainless Bertha to share with him the heritage of that wrongly dishonoured name. It was an awful alternative, but he must face it like a man. The very next day he must see Bertha and break off his engagement, at least for the present.

As for Bertha, she too lay awake all night with formless surmises floating through her brain, not knowing what to think or believe, but conscious only of some vague spectre which had suddenly risen up between her and Harry. Whatever it was, her faith in him bore her safely through; but she feared the worst for the future, and she could not sleep in her tearless misery.

After breakfast next morning, Harry came round and presented himself betimes at The Lawn. He was not in a fit state to visit his patients that day, but he could not neglect them, so he had telegraphed up to town in haste to his old hospital for an efficient substitute, and having obtained one down by the first train, he gave himself a sad and tortured holiday. Sir Arthur met him in the vestibule and motioned him silently into his own study. For a minute both men stood confronting one another in terrible silence. Then Sir Arthur spoke in a low tone. "You have come?" he said interrogatively.

"I have come," Harry answered in a firm but quivering voice, interrupting him boldly, "to release Miss Woolrych at once from her engagement with myself. I understand, of course, that even did I not do so you would have found it necessary to break it off. But I wish also freely and of my own accord to release her from the promise she made me to become my wife. That makes things, of course, more painful for me, but perhaps a little less so for you. Moreover it is the right course of action. I find myself and my family suddenly involved in a terrible suspicion of which I remained till yesterday in utter ignorance. Till yesterday, too, I had never doubted the truth of the suspicion as against Dr. Lichfield, whom I now discover to be my own father. It is my obvious duty, as matters now stand, to disprove, if possible, that fearful allegation. If I cannot disprove it, or until I disprove it, I shall never marry. From this moment forth it will be my first business in life to investigate the question. I shall hope to throw some further light upon it. Meanwhile I wish to release your daughter unconditionally from her existing engagement."

Sir Arthur bowed his head slightly. "Harry," he said, not coldly, but sternly, "there is no reason why I should not still call you Harry, in spite of this painful and distressing discovery—no other course is possible for either of us under the circumstances. I recognise that you are acting as a man of honour. But," and here he eyed him with a curious gleam of suspicion in his cold grey eye,

"I would strongly urge you not to pursue the investigation which you now propose to yourself. I know and knew all the circumstances; I am convinced—and I speak earnestly upon the matter—that no shadow of suspicion could rest upon any other living soul except Dr. Lichfield. If you can satisfy yourself in your own mind that any possible loophole of escape from the crushing force of the evidence against him anywhere exists, why, salve yourself with it for your own private benefit, and let the question rest as best you may. But to reopen the matter now would be only more fully to condemn the man whom we have just discovered to be your own father. I implore you for your own sake not to make suspicion certainty; I implore you for the sake of others not to reopen a settled question, and turn men's minds from the true quarter upon others whom I know to be absolutely innocent. Drop the subject, and no one else need ever know you are Lichfield's son. I shall keep it a secret even from my own wife; neither Lady Woolrych nor Bertha shall ever learn your identity from me or know why this engagement has been broken off."

Harry bent his head in crushed silence. He hardly knew what to say or think. At last he murmured in a low tone, "That is kind and generous of you, indeed, Sir Arthur. I thank you for your reticence." Then after a pause, "May I see Bertha?"

"Alone?"

"Alone."

Sir Arthur hesitated. "You may," he

said after a short pause, "provided you explain to her clearly and succinctly that your engagement is broken off at once and for ever."

"I will," Harry answered. "The chance of clearing my father's memory is, I acknowledge, so very slight that I need not practically mention it to Bertha."

Sir Arthur rang. "Remember," he said, as he waited for the servant, "I advise you strongly to abstain from inquiring into this painful question. It will only bring more misery upon your own head. Thomas, will you ask Miss Woolrych to come down and speak to Mr. Prior in the study?" And he left the room abruptly with a very troubled air, and a half-frightened look fixed full upon Harry.

It was a terrible thing for the young doctor to have to explain to Bertha—or rather to break off the engagement without explaining; but Harry managed somehow to do it. Bertha was tearful, silent, and confiding; the sense of unknown evil oppressed her; but when Harry told her they could never marry, and that the fault was none of his, or hers, or her father's, but a visitation of Providence, so to speak, incalculable beforehand by any one of them, she trusted him and believed him, and somehow felt in some undefined way that Harry was acting rightly and nobly. Thank heaven for that simple and beautiful trustfulness of a true and pure and good woman! It helps us out through our deepest difficulties, and makes the hard way of life easier for us at the very moment when it seems most impossible.

"Good-bye, Harry," she said, with her heart-strings breaking, but with a firm voice, as he rose to leave her. "Good-bye for ever. But I shall always love you, and I shall always pray for you."

"Good-bye, darling," Harry answered, in a choking voice. "It is terrible, terrible; but it is the only thing right and possible. Thank you for trusting me. Good-bye for ever."

And he went forth into the village street of Melbury a broken man, sustained only, if at all, by the inner consciousness that he was acting after the dictates of his own conscience. Until he could clear up that horrible doubt for himself and others, he could never again speak to Bertha.

VI.

IT was impossible for Harry to stop at Melbury. He made a hasty arrangement for a man from his old hospital to take his place, and removed with his mother and sister for the time being to London. There he would soon lose himself in the crowd: to be lost in the crowd was now his chief desire. Still, even so, his first care would be to see Serjeant Thorowgood, his father's counsel, who fortunately was still living. Harry went to call upon him in his rooms at the Albany—for the Serjeant was a bachelor—and found him an agreeable and kind-hearted old man, with a distinct recollection of all the circumstances attendant upon the famous trial. He sent in his card as Mr. Harry Prior only, and did not at

first let the old barrister know the nature of the interest he took in Dr. Lichfield.

As soon as Serjeant Thorowgood heard the case mentioned, his face at once assumed a different expression. "My dear sir," he said with great earnestness, eyeing Harry closely from under his deep eyebrows, "do you know, that's a perfect monomania of mine. I'm sure beforehand you won't agree with me—nobody ever does agree with me about it—but I'm as convinced as ever I was convinced of anything in all my life that Lichfield didn't poison his uncle. He was an innocent man, if ever there was one. Do you think I don't know a murderer when I see him? And at my time of life, too, with fifty years experience of the Old Bailey and the Central Criminal! Nonsense, sir; nonsense. Lichfield opened his whole heart to me in confidence as his counsel—told me the ins and outs of the entire case as plain as a pikestaff; and I'd go to the stake for it this very minute on that man's innocence. I would, I assure you. I've defended a score or so of murderers in my time, and got 'em off, too, half-a-dozen or so of 'em, I'm afraid, as bad cases as are going about unhung to-day in England. But Lichfield wasn't one of those. I said to the jury—it's contrary to professional etiquette, I know, but still I said it—'Gentlemen of the jury,' I said, 'upon my soul and conscience, I believe the prisoner at the bar to be as innocent as a baby of the crime he now stands charged with.' And I believe it still, and as long as I live I shall always believe it. That man

came to his death in gaol of the sheer shame of injured innocence, universally believed upon crushing evidence to be guilty of a deliberate and diabolical murder."

"But who could have done it if Lichfield didn't?" Harry asked, with a secret thrill of delight at even this single ray of hope, coming from so unexpected and critical a quarter.

The old barrister shook his head sagely. "I have my ideas," he said. "I know whom I suspect. But I keep the fear of the law of libel ever before my eyes here in England. I'm not going to accuse anyone without due evidence—especially not a distinguished officer in Her Majesty's service."

A second suspicion flashed in a moment across Harry's brain. He stifled it down. It was too horrible. No, not to rehabilitate his own father. Even to himself he wouldn't acknowledge it. It would, indeed, avail him little if he proved his father's innocence, only to put off the burden of the crime upon the shoulders of Bertha's.

And, yet, between one or the other he must surely choose. Come what might of it, he must search out this matter now to the bitter end. He thought of all the possible alternatives, all the links and loopholes in that well-sifted case, and could think of absolutely no other conceivable person. He remembered Sir Arthur's suspicious look, his anxiety not to have the question reopened, his obvious reticence in general society about his change of name, his eagerness to be known only as a

Woolrych and never as a Flamstead, his evident fear lest Harry should begin a course of inquiry which might perhaps end by incriminating himself as the murderer. Great beads of perspiration stood cold and clammy upon Harry's brow. Could he, then, only exculpate his own father's memory by bringing Bertha's father to the gallows?

In the agony of the moment the name escaped him. "You think," he said, "it was Sir Arthur Woolrych!"

The old barrister started in surprise and helped himself to a pinch of snuff. "My dear sir," he said drily, "I incriminate nobody. I accuse nobody. I cast suspicion upon nobody: Sir Arthur Woolrych is a distinguished officer in Her Majesty's service. Mr. Arthur Flamstead was an intimate friend of the Lichfield family. Mr. Arthur Flamstead alone had access to poor Lichfield's surgery. Mr. Arthur Flamstead had reasons of his own, perhaps, for wishing old Colonel Lichfield out of the way. Colonel Lichfield was then the favoured suitor for the hand of the young lady—a lady with a very large fortune—who is now Lady Woolrych. Mr. Arthur Flamstead, to my certain knowledge, betrayed a very great anxiety that Dr. Lichfield's assistant, a young man of the name of Waterlow, who was missing immediately after the murder—" Harry nodded acquiescence—"should not be searched for and should be kept out of the way. Three months later Mr. Arthur Flamstead married the lady in question, and almost immediately assumed the name of Woolrych, going into the army in a

cavalry regiment then under orders to sail for India. I don't wish to prejudge anyone, but I think we have here the terms of an equation: the Mr. Arthur Flamstead of the trial equals the Sir Arthur Woolrych of to-day, and the case lies, not to put too fine a point upon it, between Mr. Arthur Flamstead and—"

"And?"

"Your father."

Harry gave a sigh of extreme relief. "Why my father?" he asked quietly, glad to be freed from the painful burden of confessing his relationship.

"Because you look exactly like him, and exactly like a little boy of two years old, dressed in deep black, whom Mrs. Lichfield brought into court the morning before poor Lichfield died in prison of a sudden aneurism. Let us make no pretences to one another about the matter. You are young Lichfield, and you wish, like an honourable man, to clear your father's memory."

"At a terrible cost," Harry cried in agony.

"Why?"

"In confidence?"

"In confidence."

"Because I—I have been engaged to Sir Arthur Woolrych's daughter."

The old barrister drew a long breath and whistled to himself with a certain comical air of embarrassment. "Whew," he said. "That certainly complicates matters somewhat. But we must go now into this thing together. It can't be dropped; we must ferret the truth out. At least you want to get at the

truth. Is your mother living? Well, then, for her sake, at any rate, you must wish to find out that your father was no murderer."

Harry bent his head once more. "On all accounts," he said, "we must get at the truth. But how are we ever to get at it nowadays? Time has gone by so long, I fear, that it's too late at present to begin an inquiry."

"Never too late to find out murder," the old Serjeant answered cheerfully. "We have a clue, a clue the importance of which I pointed out in vain to the police at the time: the extraordinary disappearance of the witness Waterlow. The lad was at Dr. Lichfield's on the very day when the fatal plaster was made up; that much is certain. He disappeared, suddenly and mysteriously, the day after. Mr. Arthur Flamstead gave him half a sovereign the night of the murder. Why did he do it? What was it for? Where did the poor lad disappear? What has become of him? Mark my word, sir, Mr. Arthur Flamstead knows, and unless I'm very greatly mistaken in my surmise, Mr. Arthur Flamstead, after using him as his tool, got rid of him quietly."

Harry's face grew white with horror.

"That's a very awful accusation," he gasped out at last, "to bring up—to bring up against Miss Woolrych's father. Isn't there any other alternative open? Can't we suppose anything else on earth was possible?"

Serjeant Thorowgood smiled quietly. To him, these things were all ordinary matters of criminal business. One man's

as likely to be guilty as another. "Well," he said, with a second big pinch of snuff, "I don't know, I'm sure. It's none of my business. But, still, I take a professional interest in the matter. I wanted the police to investigate it at the time; but after Dr. Lichfield's death they'd take no further steps in clearing up the question. They were quite convinced for their part that Lichfield was the murderer: the coroner's jury had returned a verdict against him; public opinion was amply satisfied; no suspicion attached to anybody else, and, except your mother, I don't believe there was another soul in England who didn't think Dr. Lichfield guilty. I was considered quite a monomaniac, I assure you, for taking his part, and I got tired of talking about it, merely to be laughed at by everybody everywhere. But to this day I firmly believe, whoever committed that cruel crime, it was not and couldn't be Dr. Lichfield."

"Was no attempt ever made, then," Harry asked eagerly, "to track the assistant?"

"No attempt was ever made by anybody but myself; and as for me, I got tired of it in the end, finding out nothing. All I know is this: the boy was last seen alive the night of the murder. Dr. Lichfield had given him a holiday the next day. On that holiday he disappeared into space, and was never again heard of."

"And you don't know how to track him in any way?"

"Pardon me, I do; I was just coming to it. Some six months since, I received

a singular communication from a person in America, made in a very roundabout manner through a New York solicitor, inquiring of me, as Lichfield's counsel, whether any representatives of the Lichfield family were still living. As I did not then know of your existence, I wrote back to say that so far as I could tell they had all died out or disappeared entirely. But I begged my New York correspondent, as a matter of personal curiosity, to let me know from whom the inquiry proceeded, and with what object it had been set on foot. Well, solicitors, you know, are precious wary people. The Yankee lawyer didn't answer my question very directly; he said his client was in possession of certain facts about Dr. Lichfield which might have been of use if any members of the Lichfield family were left alive, but which would be useless under any other circumstances. I wrote once more, earnestly inquiring whether their client knew anything of the fate of the boy Waterlow. Evidently that inquiry frightened my informant. I have never received another line upon the subject from that day to this; and as the question was then one of merely abstract interest to me, I didn't care to push my investigations farther for the moment. But I have very little doubt that the letter came from some person who was aware of the facts as to the boy Waterlow. Perhaps it may have been an accomplice or accessory to the boy's murder; for murdered he was, I firmly believe, to get rid of him and burke his evidence—drowned, very likely, or thrown into the

river, and at the instigation, I don't doubt, of the real poisoner, whoever that poisoner may have been."

"But don't you think it possible," Harry inquired with a fresh burst of hope, "that the letter may have been sent by Waterlow himself? May he not have got away to America somehow, and now he is seized with an after-fit of remorse and a desire to tell all that he knows of his own share in this terrible tragedy?"

The Sergeant shook his grey head decisively. "No, no," he said, "it can't be that way. Waterlow never left England alive. Before the trial, both sides made every effort possible to procure him—the Crown, because they thought his evidence would be conclusive against the prisoner; and Dr. Lichfield, because he thought his evidence must tell, as far as it went, in his own favour. We searched for him high and low in London and elsewhere. Every port was watched; every emigrant steamer boarded. The whole police of England was on the alert to find him, and if he had been alive he must inevitably have been forthcoming. One person alone threw difficulties in the way—suggested explanations, did his best to befog and bemuddle the question, and that person, as you may guess, was Mr. Arthur Flamstead. If *he* doesn't know what became of Waterlow, nobody in England knows, I venture to tell you."

"And do you remember the name of your New York correspondent?" Harry asked eagerly. "We ought to follow up

that clue, you see. I can face the facts, however terrible they may be. But I cannot rest now till I have settled the question once and for ever."

"I have the address here," Sergeant Thorowgood answered, rising and walking across to a desk in the corner. "There it is: 'Gregg and McMurdo, 214, East Twenty-third Street, New York City.'"

"I will write and find out all about it," Harry said with a flushed face. "This suspense is killing. I had rather know the worst either way than remain in such doubt and terror as at present."

VII.

HARRY lost no time in writing to New York, through a London solicitor, whom he instructed merely to say to the American firm that the inquiries now addressed them were made at the instance of a son of Dr. Lichfield's. It was a long time to wait for the answer. Meanwhile, he could do and think of nothing else, and he spent his whole days at the British Museum and among the old law reports, hunting up the minutest recoverable circumstances about the trial of Dr. Lichfield.

The more he looked the question in the face, the more did the conviction deepen upon him that the real poisoner was not his father but Sir Arthur Woolrych. It was horrible, terrible, cruel to believe it: if the facts forced the truth upon him at last, Harry did not see how he could possibly give up Bertha's father to tardy justice: and yet that conclusion seemed almost inevitable, by the light

of the depositions and of Sergeant Thorowgood's acute suggestions. Harry read Arthur Flamstead's examination and cross-examination at the trial, and two things were abundantly clear to him: first, that though he seemed to give his evidence with extreme reluctance, that evidence itself told distinctly against Dr. Lichfield; it was the sort of evidence a man might give who pretended to be a friend of the prisoner, but secretly wished to put the blame of the murder upon the prisoner's shoulders; and secondly, that he had especially tried to evade and elude all questions put to him with reference to the disappearance of the boy Waterlow. Sir Arthur had prevaricated: of that he was certain. The more he read the reports of the trial, reading between the lines in the way that Sergeant Thorowgood's remarks had suggested, the more abundantly did the truth seem clear to him, that Arthur Flamstead (as he then was) knew perfectly the facts about Waterlow's disappearance, and was trying to conceal them from the knowledge of the jury.

Yet it seemed to Harry, with his frank, open, honourable nature, quite repugnant to be thus, as it were, plotting and prying about Bertha's father, a man whom he had always hitherto liked and respected, in spite of his somewhat austere military dignity, without at least telling him the nature of his inquiries, and letting him know in the most delicate, yet straightforward manner, that they were being prosecuted. He didn't wish to spring a mine upon Sir Arthur; and so a few weeks afterwards he went down

to Melbury, and asked once more to meet Sir Arthur by appointment at his own now deserted cottage.

Sir Arthur met him, Harry imagined, not quite so frankly and easily as of old. That, perhaps, was perfectly natural, and he must expect it in future; Lichfield's son could not look forward to a cordial greeting from those who knew the secret of his origin. But besides all this, Harry fancied—was it fancy or reality?—that Sir Arthur shuffled and hesitated suspiciously, seemed half afraid, in fact, of too open admission. Harry told him in part of his visit to Serjeant Thorowgood, omitting of course the Serjeant's opinion of Sir Arthur himself; and he told him also of the clue which Thorowgood had put into his hands for tracing the fate of the boy Waterlow. At the first mention of Waterlow's name, Sir Arthur's face grew suddenly blanched and rigid with horror. "Who told you about Waterlow?" he asked eagerly, clutching for support at the back of a chair. "How did you come to hear of Waterlow? How did you ever know there was any such person?"

"I have read up the full reports of the case," Harry answered quietly, "and I want now to find out for myself what has become of this missing assistant. Serjeant Thorowgood thinks," and he eyed Sir Arthur closely as he spoke, "that the boy Waterlow was put out of the way by some guilty person the day after the murder."

Sir Arthur sprang aside as though something had stung him. "Put out of the way," he cried; "why, what do you mean by that, Harry? Do you

mean murdered? Ay, ay, I suppose murdered! Thorowgood was always on the wrong tack. I saw it in the inquiry; I saw it at the trial. . . . Harry, I tell you the boy Waterlow was *not* murdered. I believe, myself, he fled the country, at your father's request, because he did not wish to give evidence which would have sent your father to the gallows."

"Where do you think he is now?" Harry asked, his lips white and trembling with excitement.

Sir Arthur sank back exhausted in an easy-chair, folded his hands before him helplessly, and rubbed the palms together with nervous energy. "I have some reason to believe," he said at last, "that Waterlow is living under an assumed name somewhere in America."

Harry looked at him with a searching glance. It was a terrible thing to think about Bertha's father; it had been a terrible thing to think about his own; but he wondered silently in his heart to himself which of those two had been the real murderer.

The interview was a short and very embarrassed one. In Harry's eyes, Sir Arthur seemed all the time to be shuffling and prevaricating. What was worse, he seemed to be terribly anxious—anxious and frightened for his own safety, Harry somehow fancied, whenever Harry spoke of reopening the question and endeavouring to vindicate his father's character. Was it slavish fear for his own life, or conscience-stricken anxiety for the shame and disgrace of a tardy exposure for his wife and daughter?

Yet, when Harry was leaving, the grey old general, rousing himself as from

a trance, with his tall thin figure and his clear-cut military face, laid his hand like a father upon Harry's shoulder, and cried in a voice full of genuine emotion, "Harry, Harry, for your own sake, my boy, and for Bertha's sake, and my sake, don't try to push this fruitless inquiry one step farther! Don't, I implore you. You will only make us all unhappy. You are reopening the most appalling chapter of my life. My boy, my boy, you will kill me, you will kill me." And then he wrung Harry's hand hard, and before the young man had time to answer him, stumbled blindly out into the streets of Melbury.

Harry stood long watching him from the door step, his own eyes dim with tears, and his heart almost standing still with horror within him. Sir Arthur tottered feebly up the street; Harry's heart went out in pity to him as he went. It was a painful crisis, deal with it as he might. To have arraigned that old man after so many years for the unforgotten crime of his early youth, was in itself almost an act of cruelty. Surely his punishment was already more than he could bear! The law could do no worse for Sir Arthur Woolrych than his own heart must already have done for him.

At the railway station, a bundle of texts, printed in very large letters, hung loose upon the wall. As Harry entered, with thoughts like these burning in his heart, he started at sight of the single sentence that stared him in the face from the printed placard opposite:—"Judge not, that ye be not judged." Was he too judging again too hastily? If others had made up their minds with undue

precipitancy, as he himself had done at first, that his father was really the Erith murderer, might he not also now be making up his mind too fast on slender evidence against Sir Arthur Woolrych? The timely suggestion sank deep into his mind. He returned to London hoping against hope. Yet his very hope was in itself despair; for was it not true that to vindicate his father was to condemn Bertha's, and to vindicate Bertha's was to condemn his own?

VIII.

A WEEK later, Harry was startled by receiving a solicitor's letter from America, which ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR,—In reply to your favour of the 9th inst. we have the honour to inform you that our client, Surgeon-Major Charles G. Withers, formerly of the United States Army, who is now in this city, having heard that a son of the late Dr. Lichfield is still living, has made up his mind to proceed to Europe almost immediately, and will arrive in Liverpool by the steamer *Aurania* shortly after your receipt of this letter. We will mail you his address in a few days, and will instruct him to call without delay at the office of your solicitor in London.—Respectfully,

"GREGG AND MCMURDO."

Neither Harry nor Serjeant Thorowgood could make much of this singular and non-committing letter. The only conjecture either of them could hazard was that Surgeon-Major Charles G. Withers, whose name certainly sounded very American, was a person who had, in some way, been privy to the disap-

pearance of the boy Waterlow. Evidently, however, let him be who he might, he attached great importance to the communication he had to make to them, or he would not have thought it worth his while to cross the Atlantic for the sake of seeing a son of Dr. Lichfield. So Harry waited, possessing his soul with what patience he could, for this new development to work itself out in full detail.

In a few days more he received an intimation that Dr. Withers was stopping at the Langham Hotel, and would give an interview to Harry and Serjeant Thorowgood on the next Tuesday, at eleven in the morning. "If Mr. Arthur Flamstead is still living," the stranger wrote, underlining his words, "I should particularly wish him also to be present at our meeting. Mr. Flamstead was intimately bound up with the event which led to the death of Colonel Lichfield; and as I have to make an explanation which closely concerns him, I trust you will have the kindness to hunt up his present address, if he still lives, and ask him to be present at the time and place mentioned. I believe, however, he must have died long since, as I traced him shortly after into a regiment of Lancers from which his name disappeared, to judge by the Army List, some twenty-four years ago. But if I am wrong in this conjecture, it ought to be easy for your solicitor to hunt him up with the books of reference he has doubtless at his disposal. A man who has held a commission in the British Army ought at any time to be forthcoming when wanted for legal purposes."

With much doubt and trepidation, Harry forwarded this letter exactly as he received it, to Sir Arthur Woolrych. Immensely to his surprise, Sir Arthur wrote back at once, a short, curt note, saying that he would call at the Langham Hotel on the day and hour appointed by Dr. Withers. Would he really come? Harry wondered; that was the question. Had the crime of his youth tracked him down at last; and if so, would he face his accuser now like a man, or fly like a coward at the first flush of danger?

On the Tuesday morning, as Serjeant Thorowgood and Harry walked up together to the steps of the Langham, a hansom drew up at the kerb-stone opposite, and Sir Arthur stepped from it, firm and erect and stately as ever, but pale as death and looking terribly wan, worn, and haggard. Yet he gave his hand cordially to Harry, and bowed a distant bow to Serjeant Thorowgood, whom, strange to say, he had never seen before in private since the close of the famous Lichfield trial. The old barrister remembered him perfectly, and summed him up from head to foot with his keen, critical Old Bailey stare.

"It is long since we met, Sir Arthur," he said shortly; "and then it was on business connected with this very matter."

Sir Arthur's face never changed for a moment.

"It was," he said, "and I know what you thought. I never for one second concealed it from myself. For twenty-five years I have faced the worst. This morning's interview, I hope and trust, will at last release me."

They asked for Dr. Withers, and were shown at once into a front sitting-room on the first-floor. A little man, thin, bent, and wizened, not yet fifty, to judge by his face, but prematurely aged and grey and battered, rose from his seat in a chair by the fire-place, and bowing slightly, with much effort, motioned them each into their places.

"Mr. Lichfield?" he said, with an inquiring glance towards Harry.

Harry bent his head in silent acquiescence. "I have never borne that name myself," he said; "but I find it was my father's. I am the person to whom you addressed your communication."

"I need not ask either of *your* names," Dr. Withers said, turning to the barrister and the General together. "Changed as you are, you are less changed than I am. I remember both of your faces perfectly. You are Serjeant Thorowgood; and you, sir, are Mr. Arthur Flamstead. My memory is probably better than yours; I don't suppose you can either of you now succeed in recognising me."

"I do," Serjeant Thorowgood answered, without one moment's hesitation, "I distinctly remember both face and voice; your name, when I last saw you, was Waterlow."

Sir Arthur said nothing, but Harry noticed a flush of colour, such as he had never before in his life observed, come suddenly into those pallid cheeks. It was a flush of hope, not of mere excitement. Sir Arthur felt the load of suspicion was to be lifted at last from his uncomplaining shoulders.

"Tell us at once," Harry cried eagerly,

"what you have to say about the Trith murder."

"There was no murder," Dr. Withers said slowly and solemnly. "No blame attaches to any man on earth but ME, and even to me the blame of thoughtless carelessness only. It was I who put the curari powder into the zinc ointment for dressing Colonel Lichfield's wound."

If a thunderbolt had fallen into their midst that moment it could not have produced a more immediate effect than Dr. Withers's long-delayed confession. Instantaneously, each took in its full bearings, both on himself and his neighbours. The double load was lifted at once from Harry's tortured and distracted mind. He looked at Sir Arthur. The old soldier, broken at last as no reverse of fortune could ever have broken him, bowed down his head on his hands between his knees, and cried like a child in silent thankfulness; then with a sudden burst of fervour he seized Harry's hand and gripped it hard. "My boy, my boy," he cried convulsively, "we are both saved—your father from the shadow of that horrible crime; myself from the burden of that life-long suspicion. For twenty-five years, Harry, I thought him guilty; for twenty-five years, I have expected myself to see Thorowgood's suspicion take definite form and head against me. And I will tell you now what I have never told any man yet. Two days before the trial, Waterlow gave me, for an experimental purpose, an ounce of curari. If that fact had come out in evidence, I should at once have been universally suspected of the murder. Tell us, tell us all about it!

How did you ever come to make such a fatal error?"

"I am a dying man," Dr. Withers said; "I have never recovered from the hardships of the campaign on the Potomac, and I have not now many weeks to live; but I could not die with that awful mistake of my youth unconfessed upon me. I was less to blame, Mr. Lichfield," turning to Harry, "than you might imagine. I will tell you briefly the main facts; we can come back to the details afterwards.

"On the evening when Colonel Lichfield died, I was working as usual in the back surgery. The doctor had given me a holiday for the next day, and I meant to go down by the steamer to Margate. You, sir," and he turned as he spoke to Sir Arthur, "had given me half a sovereign that evening for the little commission I had just performed for you. My mind was full of my intended outing, when the doctor gave me the prescription to make up for his uncle. We had a dead frog then lying in the surgery, and the doctor was experimenting upon its muscles with curari powder, and afterwards trying the effect of galvanizing them. Your father was always very careful about poisons, never leaving any of the bottles about; but on this occasion he was called away suddenly, and left the phial with the curari on the surgery table. I went on making up the prescription, and to prevent the possibility of any mistake, slipped (as I thought) the bottle containing the poison into my coat pocket, as my hands were greasy with mixing the ointment, meaning to replace it in the

cupboard as soon as I was finished. I mixed the ointment and sent it off, and immediately went home to my own lodgings, intending to start for Margate early in the morning. I did so, and spent the day on the sands, in utter ignorance of what had meanwhile happened. In the evening, I returned on board the steamer. It was the *Princess Amelia*. You remember the accident—all the world remembers it—it happened the very night after the supposed murder. We collided with an outward-bound New Zealand steamer; almost every soul on board perished helplessly; a few alone were picked up here and there by the boats belonging to passing vessels. I was among them; a steamer of the Monarch line for New York put out a boat, and took me on board, half drowned and senseless. I was ill on the ship till we reached America—delirious for the greater part of the time, and unable so much as to give my name to the ship's surgeon.

"When I landed at New York, they dressed me once more in my own clothes, and took me up to the Metropolitan Hospital. As they put me to bed again, faint and weak, one of the nurses took a bottle from my pocket with the label on it, 'Sulphide of Zinc,' in big black letters. Ill as I was, I looked at it with horror. In a second, the terrible truth flashed upon my mind. I had put the wrong phial in my pocket. I had given Colonel Lichfield curari in his ointment!

"As I lay there tossing and turning in the hospital cot, the terror of my mistake grew ever deeper and deeper upon me; I was afraid to give my right name;

I said merely it was Withers of London. I chose a name beginning with a W, because my initials were everywhere marked upon my linen, not in full, as C. G. Waterlow. Nobody had known I was on board the *Princess Amelia*. I hadn't said a word about it to the people at my lodgings, nor had I mentioned the use I meant to make of my holiday to Dr. Lichfield. I knew enough of the effects of curari to know perfectly that I must unintentionally have killed the Colonel. I thought my absence would be mistaken for flight, and that I would immediately be suspected of intentionally poisoning him."

"As a matter of fact," Serjeant Thorowgood interposed, "you were the one person whose character and motives nobody even for a moment called in question."

Dr. Withers nodded. "So I afterwards learned," he continued with an effort. "But at the time I could think of absolutely nothing but my own safety. Had I had the courage to tell the whole truth at once, I might have saved endless anxiety and distress to several innocent people, I know. But I had not the courage, and I feared too much for my own life. As soon as I was well enough, I sent out and got a newspaper. There I read the full account of the Erith murder, as everybody called it. I learned to my horror that Dr. Lichfield had died in prison, under the smart of this terrible imputation, and that nobody in England knew what had become of me. I felt sure there were only two people, besides myself, upon whom suspicion could possibly have fallen—Dr.

Lichfield and Mr. Flamstead. The doctor was dead, and nobody seemed to have doubted Mr. Flamstead. For the sake of my late employer's family, if I could have traced them, I might, a little later, have come forward and told the whole truth. But at first I was afraid, and later on, when I tried to track them, I found it hopeless. Mrs. Lichfield had disappeared into thin air, and all attempts to discover her whereabouts were utterly unavailing. I stopped in America, under my assumed name, and soon obtained a place as a doctor's assistant. I was an orphan, with very few friends in England: the few I had cared little about me: everybody said I had been spirited away by the Lichfields and their allies, and I had not the strength of mind to come forward and deny that baseless calumny. I know I have much need to ask you forgiveness—but for years and years I have suffered greatly. Can you forgive me?"

Sir Arthur Woolrych bowed his head. "You did very wrong," he said, "but I forgive you freely. Can you, Harry, for yourself and your family?"

"I can," Harry answered in a low tone. "And I thank you now for coming forward at last to make this statement."

There was a moment's pause, and then the Serjeant asked quietly, "Will you make an affidavit as to all these particulars?"

Dr. Withers bent his head in acquiescence. "Whenever you please," he said. "And the affidavit may be publicly printed in all the papers."

The Serjeant rose and moved towards the General. "Sir Arthur," he said, "give me your hand. For twenty-five

years, I admit, I have unjustly suspected you. But I suspected you only because of the fervour of my faith in a man whom I believed and felt to be innocent. I could not distrust Dr. Lichfield. He died in the full confidence that his character and good name would at last be established; and after so long a time, he is now finally and triumphantly vindicated. It was not so much that I suspected you, as that I could see no other possible alternative. And I couldn't disbelieve Dr. Lichfield."

The old officer gave him his hand with the tears running unrestrained down his cheek. "All this time," he said, with sobs half choking his faint utterance, "I have known that at any moment the question might be reopened, and that to reopen it would mean to cast suspicion upon me. At the moment of the trial, I too acknowledge, I committed one great wrong and indiscretion. Having known Lichfield as an intimate friend, and finding that Waterlow was being kept out of the way, as I believed, to prevent his giving adverse evidence, I tried to divert suspicion from the circumstance (meaning thereby to defeat the ends of justice), and, I fear, to some extent misled the jury. Ever since, I have been only too sensible of my wrongdoing and my error. I have bitterly repented it in sackcloth and ashes. I have seen that if ever the matter were investigated, and it were discovered that I had curari in my possession at the time, my action would surely be misunderstood, and suspicion cast unduly upon myself, to the infinite misery of my

wife and daughter. At the time, I was anxious to serve Dr. Lichfield's interests: I see now, that, here as usual, the plain, straightforward, honourable conduct would also have been the safest and the most advisable."

"It would," the Serjeant assented gravely. "It would, it would, indeed. Sir Arthur."

"We two have both done wrong," Dr. Withers put in; "but I ten thousand times more than you. And we have both had our full punishment; for the secret has worn me out prematurely, and is killing me now with its ceaseless anxiety."

"But it is upon you and yours, Harry," Sir Arthur said, still grasping the young man's hand with a spasmodic pressure, "that the brunt of the misfortune has fallen most heavily. It is always so with all wrong-doing. Not only does punishment come upon those who themselves do the wrong, but it involves others in an ever-widening circle. You, your mother, and your sister, my boy, have suffered vicariously, and so have Lady Woolrych and Bertha. It must be our duty next to repair the evil as far as possible; and in that attempt Dr. Withers, I know, will give us his assistance."

The stranger nodded with a sorrowful smile. "I have only one desire left in life," he said; "to undo as far as in me lies the mischief wrought by my carelessness and my cowardice."

Sir Arthur turned once more to the young man. "And now, Harry," he said, with a happier light in his keen grey eyes, "you and Bertha will marry one another."

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